Teo You Yenn, *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*, Singapore: Ethos Books, 2018, 285 pp. ISBN: 9789811158049, price: SGD 26.00 (paperback).

Inequality is inevitable in capitalist society. This is so taken for granted that substantial resources have been invested in managing and mitigating divisive imbalances between social and political groups. Because no ideal mechanism, economic or otherwise, exists to offset capitalism's severities, arbitrary criteria, such as ethnic origins or linguistic abilities, are often exploited by the powerful factions for their own ends. Policymakers and planners sometimes entrench and exacerbate inequalities as well. Urban planners, for example, typically play such roles in designing public spaces. Exploring issues of the commons and public spaces, the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos (1979/2017) has shown how both international and local businesses have driven such inequalities, reinforcing hierarchies and shunting profits to global investors. The complex dynamics behind social inequalities are therefore highly complex and require various methodological approaches to understand and to highlight the multiple threats inequality poses to society.

In her latest book, sociologist Teo You Yenn contributes to the field of inequality studies with an in-depth foray into the everyday experiences of the poor derived from three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore. Across twelve stylistically varied chapters, she reveals the habits and desires not only of the working and under classes, but also the stakeholders that compose what might be called social services class—namely, philanthropists, social workers, concerned citizens, and the author herself as a member of the elite class. We read (but don't necessarily learn much) about mothers' dilemmas around deciding between wage work or childcare; their children's indecisiveness in choosing gifts; and families' reluctance to fully reveal their expenditures and lifestyles to social workers and others for fear of invasive surveillance. In the latter half of the book, we hear about the challenges of the civil servants caught in a double bind as well as strong voices denying any prevalence of poverty in the city state.

For the critical thinker, this latter point becomes slightly contentious because the interlocutors in Teo's research are not represented as monolithic actors cordoned away from the highly globalized and multicultural society of Singapore. Poverty and inequality may not be mutually exclusive, but the subjects considered poor by Teo are only *relatively poorer* in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers living in Singapore. The Southeast Asian domestic workers and South Asian physical laborers have been caught in a vicious cycle of poverty to the extent that they have to undergo forced migration to address the *real inequality* happening on a global and extended time

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scale. This ethnographic observation of poorer Singaporeans ought to be reexamined more appropriately with references to longitudinal studies of social mobility or socioeconomic policy making rather than the presentist stance of absolute discrimination. Another criticism is that the framing of equality solely via the 'class' lenses can become rather myopic given that traditional perspectives on gender and race have been and are two glaring issues highly salient to the case in point.

A part of the thesis is encapsulated poignantly in the author's identification as a 'sociologist Singaporean' (Teo 2018: 10). The reordering of citizenship and vocation is *remarkable* here due to how similitude and difference with her readers and subjects are *marked* through the phrase's syntax. It is no irony then that the publication coincided with the release of the Hollywood blockbuster, *Crazy Rich Asians*, aptly titled to also emphasize the status and geographical context of being Singaporean. What we have here is a very Singaporean story and a very Singaporean problem. Perhaps as a disclaimer, Teo is bringing sociology to Singapore rather than the other way around, which is the typical formulation in American and Eurocentric academia.

For historians and other scholars of Asian studies, one important takeaway from this book would have to be its theoretical rigor. What struck me as most efficacious when I integrated the somewhat fragmented narrative was how Teo distinguishes between the concepts of discrimination and differentiation. She describes the former as the relation between rigid categorization and accessibility, i.e. the haves and have-nots, and the latter as the meaningful creation of fluid identities (Teo 2018: 165). As a cultural historian of sexuality and the arts, what I realized from her theorization was that discrimination and differentiation are better ways to understand turns of events and interpersonal relations in society, such as who gets to watch television or who gets to engage in sports.

Discrimination refers to the selective or superficial provision of goods and services to certain individuals or groups based on their fulfillment of specific criteria. This method of categorizing is perceived mostly as a discriminatory gesture not dissimilar to an arbitrary gatekeeping in accordance with illogical preferences. Differentiation on the other hand is more productive in ensuring that invented identities are socially relevant to both the state and its resources. This method of discerning the condition and potential of subjects enables the differentiation of distinct identities and allows for flexibility in the relations between customary positions, political or otherwise.

In contrast to the existing diversity and equality arguments, this new framing draws together people in otherwise disconnected positions and makes us more accountable to one another for our actions and beliefs. These and other polit-

ics of sociocultural differences can be critically reconsidered given the current divisions among social mores across Singapore. Teo's framework can certainly be emulated for a differentiated administration of, say, religion and sexuality by the state, two topics not raised by the author.

However, Teo's coinage of 'differentiated deservedness' (2015) to describe the access and support prescribed for the best performers of kinship and citizenship becomes problematic when applied across the broader spectrum of Singaporean families. This is because all households administered by the state are subjected to the one and exact welfare system and its corresponding policies. That is, according to policy every Singaporean is as deserving as another as long as he or she can differentiate themselves accordingly in terms of income and assets. We cannot make distinct discursive comparisons of Teo's 'differentiated deservedness' with, say, the bureaucratic treatment of indigenous people in Australia, where people of different ethnic and social statuses continue to encounter and counter what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'the cunning of recognition' (2002). Povinelli's theory stems from a form of identitarian politics that governs the culture and social behavior of *particular* citizens to the extent they have become morally standardized and legally legible to the state. Such illiberal control, however, can be readily observed in the tight regulation of residential allocations and education provisions by various statutory boards, such as the Housing Development Board and PAP Community Foundation; such practices deviate from the 'differentiated deservedness' model, even for the best adherents of state ideology, especially those who are considered of the 'wrong' race or academic (dis)inclinations.

The premises on which Teo is able to erect a 'differentiated deservedness' paradigm is because she has assumed the abilities and aspirations of being middlebrow or upper class in her formulation. We see this apparently in her presentation of the self within the ethnography: the crude comparisons against her cosmopolitan lifestyle, her daughter's upbringing, and her dignity as a professor of sociology. These piecemeal revelations become most obvious in her penultimate chapter on 'race', which seemed like a supplement poorly thought through and written to appease the publisher. From her intellectual resistance, this reviewer could sense how the cunning in the twisting of one's arm presents itself *equally* in the disparate lives of both the super poor and super rich. Neither the author nor her poorer subjects is willing to confront the obvious: bureaucratic exposure. Regrettably, many of the conversations provoked henceforth by the research have been handicapped in initiating any equalizing action for the subalterns because these are very much our own problems as well. The onus for any corrective compensation remains highly dependent upon local policymakers and the obstinacy of their craft.

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